AMERICA AND IRAN

A HISTORY
1720 TO THE PRESENT

JOHN GHAZVINIAN

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An important, ambitious, urgently needed book—an illuminating portrait of the two-centuries-long entwined history of America and Iran, and the first to examine, in all its aspects, the rich and fraught relations between these two powers: once allies, now adversaries. By admired historian, author of *Untapped: The Scramble for Africa's Oil* ("He would do Graham Greene proud" —*Kirkus Reviews*).

For most Americans, the history with Iran begins in 1979, with the hostage crisis in the U.S. embassy in Tehran. For most Iranians, it begins in 1953, with a coup called Operation Ajax, planned and organized by the first civilian-led CIA, which overthrew the democratically elected prime minister Mohammad Mosaddeq and reinstalled the exiled young shah on the Peacock Throne, convicting Mosaddeq of treason, and sending him to prison, with three hundred people killed in the process. But the history between these two nations is much richer than this, and much less antagonistic.

For forty years, the United States has sought to portray Iran as a dangerous, destabilizing force in the Middle East—an exporter of revolution, fanaticism, and fundamentalism throughout the region. And Iran has portrayed the United States as an equally dangerous and destabilizing force in the Middle East—an arrogant and violent superpower bent on imposing its will on the Muslim world, an ignorant parvenu with little appreciation of the historical and cultural complexities of the region. For the past four decades, each country's government has accused the other of being a terrorist enemy, an agent of darkness and death around the world.

Now in this rich, fascinating account, John Ghazvinian traces the complex, little-known story of the relations between these two powers back to the Persian Empire of the eighteenth century—greatly admired by both Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams—and an America seen by Iranians as an ideal to emulate for their own government.

Drawing on years of archival research in both the

(continued on back flap)

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First Edition

To my parents, of course,
who lived too much of this history

When the lingering sorrow of separation lifts,
The nightingale will tear back into the rose garden
Its throat filled with song

این تطاول که کشید از غم هجران بلبل
تا سراپرده گل نعره زنان خواهد شد

—HAFEZ, FOURTEENTH-CENTURY PERSIAN POET

The Iranian revolution is a fact of history, but between American and Iranian basic national interests there need be no permanent conflict.

—RONALD REAGAN,
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, NOVEMBER 1986

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Introduction

For a historian—for any storyteller, really—the challenge is always where to begin.

Does the story begin on the day the star-crossed lovers meet? Does it begin, as it does in the immortal poetry of Omar Khayyam, on the secluded riverbank, with a jug of wine and a loaf of bread, and that moment of blossoming, freshly emergent romance? For those telling the story of Iran and America, alas, it does not. This is a story that always seems to begin at the very *end,* at the moment when swords are drawn and voices are raised—when tempers are flaring and the lovers have gone their separate ways.

In the United States, so often, the story begins in 1979, with those famous grainy television pictures—the bearded revolutionaries climbing the wall of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and taking sixty-six Americans hostage, leading them blindfolded and bewildered into the street for all the world to see. It begins with a radical, hateful, anti-American revolution, and all the menacing symbolism and fanatical Middle Eastern blood-thirst that image conjures up. The very moment that America and Iran broke off ties—the moment that ended more than a century of warm and friendly relations—has become Day One, Chapter One, Verse One. The Book of Genesis.

It is an odd way to write history, this—beginning at the end. But this is the way the story is told in the United States. A catalog of Iran's sins—ranging from "support for terrorism" to "pursuit of nuclear weapons"—generally follows in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, with the accusation that all these activities stem ultimately from the radicalism of the Islamic Republic that was created forty years ago, and the ideology of hatred and hostility it has cultivated ever since. The Iran hostage crisis of 1979 has become a kind of original sin—the moment the serpent slipped into the Garden of Eden

and brought an end to the comfortable illusion of American global invincibility. The unforgivable has become the unforgiven. And nothing has been the same since.

In Iran, meanwhile, the story usually begins in 1953, with an original sin of a different kind. It begins with Mohammad Mosaddeq—a name largely forgotten by Americans, but a national hero to many Iranians. It begins with that hot afternoon in August 1953, when the CIA engineered a coup against Mosaddeq, the elected—and wildly popular—prime minister of Iran. It begins with the thugs and newspaper editors who were hired by the CIA to create trouble on the streets and give the army the cover it needed to remove the prime minister. Mosaddeq—a great admirer of democracy and human rights—had represented the hope of a generation. It was a generation that had adored America—a generation raised on years of John Wayne movies and big, stylish Chevrolets—but that quickly grew to hate it. Another ending, treated as a beginning.

This is the way the story is told in Iran. After the 1953 coup, Iran's young king—the shah*—returned from a brief exile and spent the next twenty-five years increasing his dictatorial grip on the country, bolstered by billions of dollars in weapons and training from the United States. His feared secret police jailed and tortured thousands, the royal family pilfered spectacular sums from the Iranian treasury, corrupt courtiers engaged in a lavish and opulent lifestyle, as one American president after another toasted the shah for his "steadfast" friendship. And then—only *then*—in 1979, did the hated and hollow regime finally collapse, brought down by millions of revolutionaries streaming through the streets, a handful of them so angry that they seized the U.S. embassy and took its employees hostage.

So it has remained, for forty years. History—like almost everything else—has become a casualty in the long-running war of words between Iran and the United States. For more than forty years, those who like to look for someone to blame, or something to defend, have stood in their respective corners, trading accusations about the relative criminality of the CIA coup and the embassy hostage crisis, taking very little interest in the idea that there might be a richer, more sophisticated way to look at the history that has transpired between these two nations. For more than forty years, history has been treated as a competitive sport—just another arena of contestation in the seemingly endless array of disagreements and accusations that have been hurled back and forth between Iran and the United States. And for more than forty years, endings, ruptures, and angry disagreements—rather

* *Shah* is the Persian word for "king."

than beginnings, attractions, and initial infatuations—have become the starting point for every conversation about Iran and America.

We are all much poorer for it.

The history of U.S.-Iranian relations did not begin in 1979, and it did not begin in 1953. It began hundreds of years ago—when the United States was still a handful of British colonies and Iran was still known to the outside world as the Persian Empire.* And it began with something much more interesting than hostile acts and mutual accusations about "original sins."

When we choose to take this long-term approach to history, we discover something surprising. For hundreds of years, it turns out, well before their governments had any serious high-level interaction, the peoples of Iran and America looked at each other with a remarkable degree of fascination, admiration, warmth, and benevolence. In the 1720s colonial American newspapers wrote at length, and with great sympathy, about the political affairs of the Persian Empire. In the 1790s, Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams studied Persian history as they looked for inspiration and guidance on how to run their new nation. From the 1850s to the 1920s, Persian newspapers constantly urged their readers to learn from America's example and develop their country into a progressive, prosperous constitutional republic. In 1919 there were reports of *pro-American* riots on the streets of Tehran.

This is where the story of Iran and America really begins. And this is what has been missing most acutely from all our discussions of the subject. Well before governments in Tehran and Washington began to step on each other's toes in our own lifetimes—well before the "Great Satan" and "Axis of Evil" speeches, well before Mosaddeq and the hostage crisis and Ayatollah Khomeini—relations between these two countries were animated by a spirit of common respect and mutual understanding.

* Iranians have always called their country "Iran," but for centuries Europeans (and later, Americans) erroneously referred to it as "Persia"—a reflection of the facts that the Persians were historically the most dominant of Iran's many ethnic groups, and that it was the Persians who had created the first Iranian empire, in the days of Cyrus and Alexander. This confusion is understandable, but it is somewhat akin to referring to France as "Gaul" or to Italians as "Romans." In 1935, Iran formally declared its desire to be known as Iran, not Persia. In order to avoid confusion and awkwardness when quoting from contemporary Western sources, or discussing institutions with names like the "Anglo-Persian Oil Company" or the "Persia Mission" of the American Presbyterian Church, I have mostly chosen to use *Persia* and *Persians* when discussing events before 1935, and *Iran* and *Iranians* for events after 1935.

It is this spirit—far more than any supposed original sins—that should mark the beginning of their interaction in the pages of history. And it is out of a desire to bring this history to light that this book has been written.

For the past forty years, Iran and the United States—once the closest of allies—have had almost no relationship at all. There have been no meetings between heads of state, no exchange of diplomats, no official channels for the two governments to express their concerns and views to each other. There have been no embassies, no trade missions, virtually no tourists, no student exchange programs, no military coordination or communication. Only very recently has there even been any contact between officials of the two countries.

This has created a gulf of understanding of epic proportions. Today decision-makers in neither country know, with any real depth or conviction, what their counterparts are thinking. Today an enormous chasm exists between Iran and the United States—the kind of chasm that, even in the darkest days of the Cold War, never existed between the United States and the Soviet Union.

To the uninitiated observer, the most obvious risk from this prolonged estrangement appears to be that of all-out war. But this is not the most pressing reason to study the history of U.S.-Iranian relations today. Certainly, tensions between the two countries do periodically flare up, to the point that a military confrontation appears imminent. But it would be a mistake to let these be the only moments that capture our attention. Understanding Iran—and the history of U.S. relations with Iran—is important not just because Iran is "the next country we might be bombing." Iran is not just another crisis. It is not just another bushfire in the seemingly endless series of conflagrations and catastrophes that have engulfed the Middle East in recent years.

Iran is a nation of 80 million people. It is the second-largest country in the Middle East, both by population and by area. And it is an immeasurably important part of the region's politics. For centuries, Iran has been at the crossroads of civilizations—a meeting place of cultures along the ancient Silk Road, and the key power along both the north-south axis between Russia and the Persian Gulf and the east-west axis between Asia and the Middle East. It is one of the world's most important petroleum producers—sitting atop the world's second-largest reserves of conventional crude oil and its single-largest reserves of natural gas. Iran controls maritime access to the Strait of Hormuz, gateway to one-fifth of the world's oil supply. And Iran

has one of the most dynamic, educated, and cosmopolitan populations in the Middle East—a population that, however it might sometimes appear, is far more modern, outward-looking, and comfortable with Western cultural norms than many of its neighbors. To be estranged from a nation like this—at any point in history, much less at a time when the Middle East presents such enormous challenges—would be senseless and self-defeating.

Iran is also, of course, the world's only Shia nation. Although it is not the only nation with a Shia majority (neighboring Iraq is 60 percent Shia, and several other countries have sizable Shia minorities), Iran is the undisputed *political leader* of the Shia Muslim world. Its population is more than 90 percent Shia, and if you look at a map of the region broken down by religious allegiances, Iran emerges very clearly as the center of gravity of Shiism. Iran is to Shia Islam roughly what the Vatican is to the Catholic Church, or what Moscow once was for the Communist bloc. For the United States to close itself off to a country that exercises immense political leadership over one of the two major sects of Islam makes little sense under the current circumstances.

Finally, it is worth remembering that Iran is one of the world's oldest, proudest, and most enduring civilizations. Unlike other countries in the region, Iran was not created by British or French colonial elites drawing lines in the sand or handing over power to native political elites. Rather, Iran has had three thousand years of (mostly) continuous nationhood, interrupted only by a period of foreign domination in the Middle Ages. Along with China, Egypt, Greece, and Ethiopia, Iran is one of the very few nation-states that can legitimately claim to have existed more or less continuously since antiquity. It is also one of only seven or eight nations that were never colonized by European powers.* Culturally, historically, and politically, Iran has an extraordinarily strong sense of its identity and its regional significance. It is an unavoidable presence in any discussion of the Middle East.

For all these reasons, Iran merits close attention. And for all these reasons, none of us can afford to be overly complacent about the antagonism that exists between Iran and the United States today. Though it may not be obvious on a day-to-day basis, the poisonous atmosphere that has accumulated over the years between these countries has caused tremendous damage—to the United States, to Iran, to the Middle East, and to the world as a whole. It has become, in the words of the fourteenth-century Persian poet Hafez, a kind of "lingering sorrow of separation."

* Though these things can be debated endlessly, by my estimation, Japan, China, Thailand, Korea, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Mongolia are the only other major nations that can justifiably claim never to have been colonies, protectorates, or mandates of European powers at any point in their modern history.

It should now be blisteringly clear that America's foreign policy in the Middle East is stuck—and that it is stuck in ways that could benefit enormously from an improved relationship with Iran. In Afghanistan, Iran's eastern neighbor, U.S. troops have struggled for nearly two decades trying to defeat Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other Sunni radical groups—unable to capitalize on Iran's deep, long-standing ties with local tribal forces (or its hatred of the Taliban, which dates back to the 1990s). In Iraq, Iran's western neighbor, America has expended prodigious amounts of money and manpower since 2003 but has not been able to capitalize on Iran's great influence with the Shia population there (or its same basic desire to see stability and order prevail). In Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories—where America's most important ally, Israel, feels surrounded by enemies—Iran has built up a formidable array of alliances and could play a decisive role in either advancing or undermining any potential peace agreements. Even in unexpected places, like Yemen, Bahrain, and Egypt, Iran has relationships with local actors that could be leveraged in a very different direction if circumstances ever allowed for it.

In short, there is not a single problem the United States is dealing with in the Middle East that cannot be traced, in one way or another, to its dysfunctional relationship with Iran. And there is not a single problem that would not, to some degree, benefit from an improvement in that relationship. For forty years, America's attempts to advance its interests in the Middle East have suffered immeasurably because of this relationship of bile and hostility that exists with the Islamic Republic. Yet that same relationship, paradoxically, could prove to be the key that unlocks so much—if only it were allowed to turn in the opposite direction.

When I set out, in 2007, to tell the story of Iran and America, I felt it was important that each country have a chance to be heard—properly, on its own terms, without the filter of a political agenda. I felt it was important not to apportion blame, or to look for culprits and victims, or to take sides. What was missing from most discussions, I thought, was a fair, dispassionate record of the many events that have led up to the present-day impasse. I wanted this to be the first book that was written neither "from Tehran" nor "from Washington" but rather was unencumbered by the reflexive assumptions and ideological baggage that so frequently characterize writings on this subject.

Part of this, for me, meant doing something many Americans writing on this subject never do, which was to actually *go* to Iran. I was born in that

country, in 1974, but left at the age of one, and had never been back. In a way, this meant that Iran was as alien to me as it is to most Americans. But it also meant I had the ability to travel there without much difficulty—a privilege that I felt it was important to make use of.

By traveling around the country—talking to Iranians from all walks of life but also, crucially, scouring through archives not easily accessible to Western scholars—I hoped to create a richer, more sophisticated version of this story. And I hoped to take the information I found in Iranian archives and place it alongside similar evidence from the United States—allowing each country's sources to speak for themselves. I knew this was not the first book ever written on the history of U.S.-Iranian relations, and that it would not be the last. I did, however, want it to be the first that used both American *and* Iranian archives. For ten years, from 2007 to 2017, I engaged in what I believe is the most exhaustive and wide-ranging study ever undertaken on the history of U.S.-Iranian relations.* And the result, I hope, is the first really comprehensive attempt to understand how these two countries have ended up in the confrontational position they are in today.

But my aim has not been just to be comprehensive for its own sake—or to laboriously hash out every tedious detail of U.S.-Iranian relations. My aim has been to make the case for a more enlightened principle: that history can be a force for peace. If this book accomplishes only one thing, it should be to help readers in both Iran and the United States understand that there is nothing inherently grotesque or untrustworthy about the "enemy" on the other side. If one thing should quickly become obvious, it is that both countries have occasionally made decisions that seem beastly and reprehensible to the other, but that they have done so as a result of peculiar historical circumstances, conditions, and considerations—not because they are inexplicably evil.

Informing my narrative throughout this book has been a conviction—unspoken for the most part and perhaps even naïve at times—that the current state of antagonism between Iran and America is wholly unnecessary. What I hope emerges from these pages is a portrait of two countries with far more in common than they ever will have to drive them apart—and far more in common than either cares to admit. And what I hope every reasonable reader will conclude from this narrative is that the time is long overdue for a mending of fences. Though there are people in both countries—and indeed in other countries—who believe their interests are best served by perpetual antagonism between Iran and America, I believe most people reading these words will not share this cynical perspective. The

* For more details, please see the Acknowledgments.

security and prosperity of the United States, the security and prosperity of Iran, the cause of world peace, and even—if I may be so bold—the nobler instincts of humanity will be better served in a world where America and Iran learn to set aside their differences. And it is my earnest hope that this book, by telling the story of how it all came to be, might play some small role in hastening that possibility.